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SUBJECT: Background for April 9 Meeting Between U.S. Secretary of Education Spellings and Greek Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Stylianides

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1. (SBU) Summary: Greek Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Evripides Stylianides will meet with Secretary Spellings on April 9, 2008. Secretary Spellings is the only cabinet-level official Stylianides will be meeting on his trip to Washington. The meeting offers an excellent opportunity to highlight the vigor of U.S.-Greek educational exchange, including the Fulbright program, and to congratulate Minister Stylianides on a text book program to assist Roma children. The meeting is also a chance to about religious freedom in Greece. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Biographical Information: Evripides Stylianides was appointed Greek Minister of Education and Religious affairs in September 2007. He is well known to the Embassy from his previous portfolio as Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Minister Stylianides speaks good English, is friendly, sympathetic to our issues, and very knowledgeable about education reform. Education reform was the focus of meetings between Minister Stylianides and Ambassador Speckhard in December 2007, with a Congressional delegation in November 2007, and with DCM Countryman in October 2007.

3. (SBU) Discrimination Against American Schools In Greece: Currently, non-state colleges and universities in Greece operate as "learning laboratories." The Greek government does not recognize degrees or course work from these schools, which include U.S.-affiliated schools and institutions offering American-style tertiary education. Several of these have a long and distinguished history in Greece including the American College of Greece, Anatolia College in Thessaloniki, and the more recently established University of Indianapolis. The government's position is based on Article 16 of the Greek constitution, which states that education at all levels must be provided by the state, for free, and that university level institutions "shall operate under the supervision of the state and are entitled to financial assistance from it." The practical result is that graduates of non-state schools in Greece are effectively barred from seeking a license for certain professions, cannot apply for public sector jobs, and/or may receive lower pay for these jobs. As a result, enrollment in non-state schools is negatively affected.

4. (SBU) Education Reform In Greece: It is generally accepted that comprehensive reforms of Greek higher education are long overdue. In January 2006, Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis announced a two-dimensional approach to reform higher education in Greece. Mass student protests followed resulting in the occupation of university buildings and suspension of classes in certain faculties for weeks at a time. The demonstrations also caused the change in venue for the OECD Ministerial attended by Secretary Spellings in June 2006. It is also widely recognized that former Education Minister Marietta Giannakou lost her Parliamentary seat in the September 2007 elections as a result of her strong push for reform. Publicly, and in private meetings with the Ambassador and DCM, the current

Education Minister, Evripides Stylianides, continues to voice the Karamanlis Administration's strong support for education reform, however, Stylianides is taking a more measured approach than his predecessor and warns of the many obstacles facing reform in this Parliamentary session.

15. (SBU) Karamanlis Administration's Proposed Education Reforms: The proposed reforms involve a constitutional amendment to allow and recognize private, non-profit universities; and administrative changes in the operation of existing universities through an "education framework law" that would make them more manageable, efficient and quality based.

16. (SBU) The two reforms complement each other but the former requires a constitutional amendment requiring a minimum of 180 votes that needs to be ratified in this session of Parliament (the Karamanlis Administration has only 151 votes). If it is not passed in this session, by constitutional law, a new constitutional reform measure cannot be introduced for another eight years. The reform known as "the education framework law" was passed in 2006 in a

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considerably watered down version from the initial proposal offered by the Administration. Parts are beginning to be implemented while other elements are still under discussion by university and ministry authorities. There have been a few modest demonstrations so far this academic year and protest groups are threatening to ramp-up their activities.

17. (SBU) EU 2005/36 Directive: This EU-generated Directive adds another element to the education reform debate in Greece. It requires recognition of professional qualifications of university graduates who earn their degrees at local, private EU schools. Despite an EU court-ordered directive that Greece comply by October 2007, so far Greece has not acceded to the EU Directive. If Greece eventually complies with the EU Directive but does not also include American-affiliated institutions, the American institutions will be greatly disadvantaged.

18. (SBU) Greek Positions: Initially, the Karamanlis government and the main opposition party leadership (PASOK) were both on record in support of the education reform measures. The smaller Communist and coalition parties opposed them. Parliamentary and public opinion also generally appeared to favor reform while Greek media followed their party lines. A report from a ministry advisory group, the National Council on Education (comprised of notable Greek educators), also strongly supported educational reform.

19. (SBU) In the face of continuing protests from PASOK's own student organization, however, opposition PASOK leader George Papandreou backpedaled from his initial support and now opposes the constitutional amendment and is suggesting that other reforms be delayed.

110. (SBU) In meetings with Ambassador Speckhard and DCM Countryman, Minister Stylianides has been pessimistic about the chances for a constitutional amendment given the lack of opposition support. As an alternative, Stylianides suggests that an executive legislative provision be tabled that could protect the role of public universities but provide for recognition of private universities. Stylianides prefers that Papandreou offer this provision but says he is prepared to do so himself if necessary.

111. (SBU) As an alternative, Minister Stylianides notes that the EU court might also force Greece to recognize EU degrees per the EU 2005/36 Directive. If this happens, Stylianides says he will seek appropriate language to recognize U.S.-accredited schools. It is unclear, however, exactly when or how this will happen.

112. (SBU) As a more immediate, practical path, Stylianides suggests that U.S. schools find a "mother university" within the EU, particularly in Cyprus, with which to affiliate so the American schools can enjoy the benefits extended to EU institutions.

113. (SBU) USG Position: We support the recognition of degrees for private colleges and universities in Greece and have long pushed for reform in this area. Given the sensitivity of this issue and the rampant anti-Americanism in the Greek press, we are careful in our public statements about the education reform issue in Greece. We note our support for reform, underscore the contribution of quality, American-affiliated institutions in Greece, and highlight the positive U.S. experience with both public and private school options. Institutions in any reform measures adopted.

¶14. (SBU) We are hopeful that the constitutional amendment will pass in this Parliamentary session, however, it is not at all certain that this will happen. If a constitutional amendment is not possible, we support the alternative legislative provision suggested by Minister Stylianides and would also welcome including U.S.-accredited schools in any EU 2005/36 Directive language. While we understand the practicality of American schools affiliating with EU schools, we do not support this as a solution since it ultimately dilutes the American educational model we are trying to encourage. Washington officials should press the Minister to do everything possible to include U.S.-accredited schools in the scope of the Greek decree on recognition of EU degrees.

¶15. (SBU) Religious Freedom: Minister Stylianides is Minister of Education and Religious Affairs. Although he has requested this meeting on educational matters, and Greece's record on religious

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freedom issues is generally strong, we recommend that U.S. concerns about religious freedom issues in Greece also be raised.

¶16. (SBU) Stylianides's Ministry oversees enforcement of provisions of the Greek constitution and Greek law which prohibit proselytizing and stipulate that no rite of worship may disturb public order or offend moral principles. Greek anti-proselytizing laws have led to the arrests of scores of persons since being enacted in the 1930s. To this day, the laws continue to result in a handful of young missionaries facing criminal charges and jail time throughout Greece. As a result of such arrests, Greece has been found in violation of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

¶17. (SBU) Examples of (most frequently) young Mormon missionaries or Jehovah's Witnesses facing arrest and trial on these charges are not uncommon. Often, the arrests come about after police officers receive a complaint of proselytizing. Frequently, instead of facing formal arrest and trial, missionaries are taken to a police station for an "identity check," and are released without charges after several hours. In one recent case, however, two Mormon missionaries were arrested (one of whom was an American citizen) and held in custody overnight. They were placed on trial the next day and although they were acquitted, the ordeal was stressful, frightening and costly. The USG has urged Greece to consider repealing the laws which permit officers to make these arrests or, at a minimum, to take steps that ensure no more persons are arrested under these antiquated legal provisions.

¶18. (SBU) The Education Minister should be congratulated on a five million Euro text book program designed to assist Roma children in developing basic educational skills. We are also working to arrange a visit to a Roma camp near Athens by Ambassador Speckhard on or about April 8, when International Roma Day is celebrated, to draw the attention of the Greek public to their situation.

¶19. (SBU) The Secretary should also underscore the vigor of educational exchange between the U.S. and Greece. The Fulbright Program in Greece, for example, is the oldest in Europe and celebrates its 60th anniversary this year. It has actively supported two-way exchanges since its inception.

¶20. (SBU) We greatly appreciate the GoG's continuing contribution to the Fulbright Program. Secretary Spellings should thank actual value has declined due to exchange rate losses).

¶21. (SBU) Secretary Spellings might also note our pleasure that in June 2008, Greece will host the Fulbright-Hays teacher program. Sixteen American educators will participate in a two-week cultural enrichment program in Greece.

¶22. (SBU) According to Institute of International Education (IIE)/Open Door statistics for the 2005-06 academic year (the most recent available), 2,088 Greek students studied in the U.S. (a decrease of 4.9% from the previous year), and 3,227 American students studied in Greece (an increase of 32% from the previous year). We are urging the GoG to amend its visa policy so American students receive visas for the duration of their studies in Greece (which is what Greek students generally receive for their U.S. studies). Currently, Greece gives American students a uniform 90-day visa, regardless of the length of their study program. Extensions must be routinely requested (an expensive, onerous process) and often are not received before the study program ends. The GoG recognizes the problem and promises to address it.
SPECKHARD